

November 2020

November 2, 2020 ANSWERED PRAYER

Readings for today: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

November 3, 2020 POTTER AND CLAY

Readings for today: Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

November 4, 2020 ELECTION DAY REFLECTIONS

Readings for today: Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35

November 6, 2020 THE TABLE OF JESUS

Readings for today: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

November 7, 2020 UNITY

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November 12, 2020 RESURRECTION

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November 13, 2020 TRUE CONVERSION

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November 16, 2020 GOD HATES RACISM

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November 17, 2020 FIRST MISSIONARIES

Readings for today: Acts 12-14

November 18, 2020 REAL LIFE IN THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for today: James 1-5

November 19, 2020 JUSTIFICATION

Readings for today: Galatians 1-3

November 20, 2020 TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: Galatians 4-6

November 21, 2020 CHURCH CONFLICT

Readings for today: Acts 15-16

November 23, 2020 FAITH ON TRIAL

Readings for today: Acts 17, 18:1-18

November 24, 2020 TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Readings for today: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

November 25, 2020 GOD IS MY HELPER

Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

November 26, 2020 GIVING THANKS

Readings for today: Acts 18:19-19:41

November 27, 2020 THE MIND OF CHRIST

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4

November 30, 2020 WAIVING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 9-11

November 2, 2020
ANSWERED PRAYER

Readings for today: [Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36](#)

“And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” (Matthew 21:21-22)

I am sure we all have things we've prayed over for years. Prayers for loved ones to come to faith. Prayers for those we care about to be healed. Prayers for direction. Wisdom. Guidance on decisions. Prayers for sin to be rooted out of our lives. Prayers for provision. Prayers for protection. Prayers for opportunities. If you are like me, you read a passage like today and you begin to wonder...do I not have enough faith? Is the reason my prayers aren't being answered my doubts? My fears? My sin?

What does it mean to “have faith?” In my experience, far too many of us equate faith with our feelings. We struggle with faith if we aren't feeling an emotional high during worship. We struggle with faith if we read the Bible and don't feel something. We struggle with faith if we pray and don't sense God's abiding presence. Still others of us equate faith with belief. Our mental assent to the notion that Jesus is who He says He is. We believe He lived. Died. Rose again. And while these certainly are aspects of faith – because we are to love God with all our hearts and minds – they do not represent the sum total of what Jesus is talking about here when he calls his disciples to “have faith.”

Having faith means placing our trust in the Father's will. It means surrendering to His ways and His plans. It means setting His desires above our own. It represents a complete and total commitment to God no matter how we may feel or what we may think. Jesus trusted His Father. Jesus had faith. And what marked the faith of Jesus was the fact that He did nothing outside the will of His Father. He only did what His Father willed. Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life like the one He will pray in Gethsemane...not my will but Thine be done? Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life? How many times He asked the Father to let the cup pass Him by? On the surface, it appears the Father didn't answer those prayers. So does this mean Jesus didn't have enough faith? No. Quite the opposite. Jesus trusted completely in His Father and was willing to do whatever His Father willed so He relinquished His own will. His own thoughts. His own desires. And the Father used Him to “move mountains into the heart of the sea” as the power of sin was broken and death defeated.

Jesus had faith. And because He had faith, He always...ALWAYS...asked for the Father's will to be done in His life. When Jesus encourages His disciples that “whatever they ask for” they will receive, He assumes they will be asking for the Father's will just as He has been asking for the Father's will throughout the course of His own life and ministry. This is a baseline assumption when it comes to prayer. It is foundational to true Christian prayer. When we come before the Father, we do not come simply to present our requests or ask God to bless our will and our way. We come boldly but humbly before His throne. We come with confidence and a surrendered heart knowing the Father already knows what's best for us. We come not with clenched fists but with open hands to whatever the Father desires for our lives. We lift our loved ones up to Him, trusting in His gracious election. We lift those we care about up to Him, trusting Him for healing in this life or the next. We pray for His wisdom to understand our circumstances. We ask for His strength to root out sin in our lives, knowing all the while that His grace is sufficient for us and His power is made perfect in our weakness. This is what it means to “have faith” when we pray.

Readings for tomorrow: [Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50](#)

November 3, 2020
POTTER AND CLAY

Readings for today: [Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50](#)

“Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.” (John 12:39-40)

“For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)

These are some difficult words to hear. How is it that God would choose some and not others? How is it that God would open the eyes of some and not others? How is it God would regenerate some hearts and not others? How is it that God would actively blind eyes and harden hearts to the message of the gospel? Matthew even takes it a step further. Many are called but few are chosen? Is God playing some cosmic game of “duck, duck, goose?” Is that how salvation works?

I will not pretend to probe the mysteries of divine election in this post. Nor will I seek to untangle the Gordian knot of predestination vs. free will. I imagine that debate will last until Jesus’ return. Perhaps even beyond. It is not given to us to understand these things, only to accept them. And this is where our faith is put to the test. Do we believe God is good? Do we believe God is wise? Do we believe God is true? Do we believe God has a plan? Do we believe God is worthy? Do we believe God is righteous? All these things are called into question the very moment we read verses like these and think to ourselves “this doesn’t seem fair.”

It is a dangerous thing to question the nature and character of God. It is a fearful thing for the clay to say to the Potter, why have you made me thus? It is arrogant to demand God give an account to us or answer to our flawed notions of justice or meet our democratic standards of fairness. This is where growing up in America where our leaders must answer to the will of the people hurts us. Our cultural context works against us as we read. God is no democratically elected leader. He is our King. Our Lord. Our Sovereign. He created the universe and all that is in it. We are dust. We are ashes. We are nothing and it is only because God has decided to set His love on us that we are worth anything at all. It is only because God decided to make us in His image that we have dignity and honor. But these things are not our own! They are conveyed to us by God Himself for His own mysterious purposes.

So what if God – desiring to make known His power and reveal His glory – decided to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor? What if God – desiring to make known His justice and righteousness – raises up some for glory and others for destruction? Does this make God unjust? Does this make God unfair? Does this call into question God’s goodness and righteousness? If we are honest, there can be only one answer. What right do we – created beings one and all – have to question our Creator? As the Apostle Paul says, “What right does the clay have to question the Potter?”

Here is where the rubber meets the road when we talk about surrender. Submission. Sacrifice. We lay it all in His hands. We give it all to Him. He alone is worthy of all glory and honor and power because He stands outside time and space and creation. He is far removed from any of our human notions of justice and righteousness. He does not answer to His creation. Furthermore, humility demands that we accept the fact that He sees far more than any of us do. He has an eternal perspective we cannot grasp. His wisdom is infinite and His knowledge without end. What seems paradoxical to us is logical to Him. What seems contradictory to us makes perfect sense for Him. What seems impossible to us is well within the bounds of His authority and rule and reign. At the end of the day it comes down to this... God is God and we are not. This is good news. Especially on Election Day. Amen?

Readings for tomorrow: [Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35](#)

November 4, 2020
ELECTION DAY REFLECTIONS

Readings for today: [Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39](#), [Mark 12:13-44](#), [Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35](#)

One of the great dangers to our nation today is self-righteousness. We seem utterly convinced of our own virtue and our opponent's vice. We are sure that our cause is good and our opponent's is evil. Our people, our platform, and our party represents justice, righteousness, and the American Way while our opponents people, platform, and party represents oppression, wickedness, and an existential threat to our way of life. Is it any wonder that our nation is literally tearing itself apart?

Self-righteous people can rationalize just about anything. So convinced of their own good, they set themselves up as judge and jury over those who disagree. So convinced of their own way, they refuse to tolerate any dissent. So convinced of their own virtue, they de-humanize their opposition which then leads to violence and chaos. When you attempt to confront a self-righteous person, they deflect. They refuse to listen. They cannot hear anything that does not fit their narrative. When you attempt to work with a self-righteous person, you will find them rigid, legalistic, and unwilling to compromise. In short, it is their way or the highway. In extreme cases, it is their way or you lose your job. Lose your relationship. Lose your freedom if they have their way. Self-righteousness is the fundamental root of all totalitarian societies.

Sadly, it's not new. Jesus himself encountered it. Listen to how he describes it in the Gospels. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Matthew 23:2-12)

Does that sound familiar at all? How many times have we seen political leaders come up with all sorts of ideas they impose on us while exempting themselves from the same rules? How many times have we seen someone in authority say one thing and do another? How many times have we watched as people of influence and power and great wealth act in self-serving and self-promoting ways? We are a nation of hypocrites which is why we find ourselves in the mess we're in. Jesus calls us to a different path. If we want to be great...truly great...we must become a servant. We must humble ourselves not just before God but before one another. We must decrease so that Christ may increase. We must seek to serve rather than be served.

We have a long way to go, friends. It's going to take years to dig ourselves out of the hole we find ourselves in. It will take each one of us doing our part. We all bear responsibility for the mess we've made. By definition, in a democracy we get the government we deserve. The current political chaos serves as a mirror, reflecting back on us our own worst fears and failures. Change must begin in each human heart. Self-righteousness must be rooted out and replaced with humility and sacrificial love. This is our only hope and it must be our continual prayer if America is ever to thrive again.

Readings for tomorrow: [Matthew 24-25](#), [Mark 13](#), [Luke 21:5-38](#)

November 6, 2020
THE TABLE OF JESUS

Readings for today: [Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35](#), [Mark 14:1-2, 10-31](#), [Luke 22:1-38](#), [John 13](#)

Election Day has come and gone and the results still remain in doubt. We don't know yet who won. Who lost. Votes are still being counted. Lawsuits have been filed. Debate rages as those on the political Left accuse the Right of voter suppression and those on the political Right accuse the Left of voter fraud. The outrage in our country is boiling over. Battle lines are being drawn. Apocalyptic pronouncements are being made. Listening to the rhetoric, it feels like we are engaged in a civil war. And perhaps we are. At least on social media. As I scroll, I find myself strangely (?) thankful to God for the diversity of friends He has given me. Friends from across the political spectrum. People of color from all walks of life. Friends who are rich and friends who are poor. Urban friends. Rural friends. Friends who are gay and straight. Most of these friends are Christian. Many, however, are not. And I love them all. But it's hard right now. Those friendships are being tested. The bonds of love are beginning to fray. Political views have become a litmus test for a person's character. Those that fail are not just different. They are evil. They are not just misguided. They are malevolent. They are not just mistaken. They are immoral.

Our politics have taken on a theological edge. Both sides claiming Jesus. Both sides believing He is on their side, defending their cause. Religious wars are always the most brutal because the battle is between good and evil with heaven and hell literally at stake.

But what if Jesus isn't taking sides? What if, instead, Jesus is calling us to take His side? What does that look like, you might ask? It looks like a table where 12 disciples sit, eating a meal together. James and John are there. Two guys who think they're better than everyone else. Simon the Zealot is there giving the stink-eye to Levi the tax collector. Peter is there in all his arrogance and pride. And Judas. The betrayer. The man who was just paid 30 pieces of silver to hand Jesus over. What a crew! The differences could not be more stark! The divisions more pronounced! And yet what does Jesus do? "He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him." (John 13:4-5) "He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28) If the table of Jesus was large enough to include even His betrayer, could not our tables also be set for those who might disagree with us politically?

Does this mean we gloss over or ignore or withdraw from the political debate? Of course not! Jesus wasn't killed for His love. He was killed because He was politically dangerous. We must defend the cause of the widow and orphan, alien and stranger, unborn and oppressed. We must lift up the poor. Come alongside the hurting and the wounded and abused. We must put an end to violence in our local communities. We cannot tolerate corruption or make excuses for the immorality of our leaders. We have to demand more. More from them. More from one another. More from ourselves.

Friends, we betray Jesus when we attempt to co-opt Him for our cause. The reality is all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Even our righteousness is like filthy rags to Him. Only God is holy. Only God is just. Only God is merciful. And faithfulness to God means following His example. Humbling ourselves. Laying aside our pride and privilege. Taking the place of a lowly servant. Washing the feet of those with whom we disagree. Laying down our lives for others irrespective of their political beliefs. Loving even our enemies, especially on Twitter. ;-)

Readings for tomorrow: John 14-17

November 7, 2020
UNITY

Readings for today: [John 14-17](#)

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:22-23)

There is power in unity. There is power when God’s people abide in Him. There is power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. This power is not our own. It is a divine power. Tearing down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. Tearing down every dividing wall of hostility that stands between us and God, us and each other. It is the power of salvation for all who believe. It’s a power that regenerates hearts. Justifies our very being. Sanctifies our lives. It is a power to make those orphaned by sin into children of the Most High. This is the power of God.

Jesus knew this power. Jesus drew on this power. Jesus understood this power. He lived in close, deep, intimate communion with His Father His entire life and He drew on this power constantly to heal, forgive, cast out demons, calm storms. He drew on this power when He multiplied the loaves and fishes and turned water into wine. He drew on this power when He suffered. Died. And this same power was at work when He was raised from the dead.

This is the power Jesus offers to those who follow Him. Throughout His farewell discourse in John 14-17, Jesus refers constantly to the unity He has with the Father and the unity desires to have with His people.

If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

I will ask the Father, and he will give you...the Spirit of truth...You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 14:7, 10, 16-18, 20, 23, 15:5)

The gift Jesus offers us in Himself is beyond comprehension. He literally offers us the same power that created the universe. The same power that raised the dead. The same power that will one day bring all things together and make all things new. This same power is available to us through our relationship with Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why no weapon that is formed against us can stand! This is why no flaming arrows of the evil one can pierce the shield of faith! This

is why we have nothing to fear! Because we abide in the Vine! We stand on the Rock! We drink from fountains of Living Water!

But what does union with Christ look like? Agreement. Submission. Surrender. It requires us to take our lives. All our thoughts. All our words. All our desires and align them with Jesus. Make His will our own. Allow His Spirit to determine what is True and Noble and Right rather than continuing to do what is right in our own eyes.

As we draw close to Jesus, we will find ourselves drawing close to one another as well. The Body of Christ will discover a collective power in its unity that will make a huge impact on the world. I firmly believe this is the secret to the revival taking place in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti. Almost 5,000 churches have been planted. Over 600,000 lost people have been saved. God is changing the landscape in places like Gojo, Dire Dawa, and Borena. He is changing the landscape in Torit, South Sudan and in northern Uganda. He is just getting started in Djibouti and will move into Somalia in the next few years. All because believers in these regions have put aside their differences and come together as one in Christ. Does this mean they agree on everything? Absolutely not! Unity is not the same as unanimity! No, their unity comes from a deeper source. A spiritual source. A well that never runs dry. Their common faith in Christ!

I love the words of Psalm 133. How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil that overflows! Dew that drenches the mountains, bringing new life! There God commands His blessing...life evermore! In these fractured and divided times, the church has a great opportunity to show the world the power of the gospel in our unity with Christ and each other! May we answer the call of Jesus' prayer!

November 9, 2020
THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

Readings for today: [Matthew 26:36-75](#), [Mark 14:32-72](#), [Luke 22:39-71](#), [John 18:1-27](#)

There is nothing more revealing about the humanity of Jesus than His time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sorrowful and troubled. His soul in great distress. In agony, He weeps. His anxiety is so high, He sweats great drops of blood. Some theologians speculate that what Jesus was experiencing in this moment was the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. The withdrawal of the Father's abiding presence as He begins to take on His shoulders the full weight of human sin. The dark reality of what He is about to suffer hits Him with full force. He begs the Father to take the cup away. But the Father is committed to this course of action. The Cross awaits the Messiah.

The disciples flee. All their hopes are dashed as Jesus commands them to put away their swords. Their secret dreams of an uprising that would overthrow the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of God on earth come to an end when Jesus heals the wounded soldier. One can imagine their bitter disappointment when Jesus DOESN'T call on legions of angels to fight at His side. So they abandon Him. They finally see where all this headed and it doesn't look good.

But Peter isn't quite ready to give up. He follows at a distance. Maybe waiting for an 11th hour miracle that would justify the last three years of his life. Has it all been a waste? Have all the sacrifices he's made been for naught? Leaving his business? His home? His family? So he sits in the courtyard of the high priest hoping to hear news of the verdict. A servant girl sees him. He denies knowing Jesus and gruffly moves away to the entrance. She follows. Again, he denies knowing Jesus. A crowd has now gathered. Finally, he lets out a curse and swears he has never been with the man. In that moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Peter sees His Lord on His knees being brutally beaten by the Romans. The religious elite jeering and cursing and spitting on Him. Peter is utterly broken. This is really happening. All hope is truly lost.

I've often wondered what Jesus must have felt in that moment as well. His most faithful disciple. The one He loved perhaps more than any of the others. The man He had poured so much of His life into over the last three years abandoning Him. Betraying Him. Denying Him. Though expected, it must have cut Him deeply. Jesus is now truly all alone. His followers are all gone. The Spirit has withdrawn His presence. The angels are no longer at His side. He must face His suffering alone. He has been forsaken. And this is just the beginning. It is the Father's will that He drink this cup to its dregs in order to save us from our sins.

"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted...Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 2:17-18, 7:25)

Readings for tomorrow: [Matthew 27:1-31](#), [Mark 15:1-20](#), [Luke 23:1-25](#), [John 18:28-19:16](#)

November 10, 2020
REVOLUTION

Readings for today: [Matthew 27:1-31](#), [Mark 15:1-20](#), [Luke 23:1-25](#), [John 18:28-19:16](#)

Barabbas has always fascinated me. I used to picture him as a common criminal. A wild-eyed murderer with crazy hair. Someone who was probably insane. I could never understand why the people would willingly exchange Jesus for this nut job. Why put a violent criminal back on the streets? Why invite this kind of danger back into the community? Were they truly that angry with Jesus?

But then I began to read a little deeper. Barabbas was not an ordinary criminal. He was a leader of an insurrection. A revolution in the city that threatened to overthrow Rome. As such, he may have been well-known. Famous. Admired for his zeal. Revolutionaries are always popular with the people. Yes, they may be violent. Yes, they may kill for the sake of the cause. But history is written by the victors and one man's murderer is another's freedom fighter.

Furthermore, I believe the people had become that disenchanted with Jesus. We simply cannot overstate their hope that He would be the one to overthrow the Romans. Cleanse the Temple. Purify the priesthood. Get rid of the hated Herodian dynasty. Re-establish the kingdom. Sit on David's throne. Reign and rule over a free, independent, powerful nation of Israel. As such, Jesus' words to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world..." (John 18:36) were brutally disappointing. To adapt that famous line from William Congreve, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman (or a people) scorned." When Jesus failed them, the people turned on Him. Their love turned to hatred. Their devotion to rage. Their fury burned white-hot and, when given an opportunity to exchange Him for another, a revolutionary who understood their cause, they jumped at the chance.

Sadly, we continue to make the same mistake. We simply cannot seem to put aside our fascination with those who would use the tools of violence and anger and hatred to bring about a revolution. The ends justify the means in our minds. So we attach ourselves to Barabbas' of all stripes only to be let down over and over again. And once the revolutionary fires burn out - as they always do - we find ourselves worse off than before. The darkness creeps in. The despair deepens. Hopelessness settles into our hearts.

When will we understand? When will we grasp the full measure of what Jesus is saying? His Kingdom is not of this world! His ways are not our ways! His thoughts are not our thoughts! Our hope can be built on nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else than Jesus' blood and righteousness! He alone is our firm foundation! He alone is the Rock of our salvation! He alone is our sanctuary and fortress! Our refuge and strength! Our very present help in times of trouble! If we have faith in Him, we will not fear! Though the earth give way. Though the oceans roar. Though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea! Nations rage! The kingdoms of this earth come and go! Only God remains. He will not be moved. He will not slumber or sleep. He is the Lord of hosts. When He utters His voice, the earth melts.

Remember, Jesus could have called down legion upon legion of angels and laid waste to the Roman Empire. He could have called on the Heavenly Host to defeat all those who opposed Him. Not a single lash of the whip would have touched Him. Not a single blow would have landed unless He willed it to be so. Jesus chose to turn the other cheek. To let the violence and rage play itself out on His body. He took every stroke. He endured every blow. He willingly suffered every stripe. So that we might be healed. So death might be defeated. So evil might be crushed once and for all. This He did for us. And this

He now calls us to do for others. May our engagement in this world look more like Jesus and less like Barabbas.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

November 11, 2020
GOD-FORSAKEN

Readings for today: [Matthew 27:32-66](#), [Mark 15:21-47](#), [Luke 23:26-56](#), [John 19:17-42](#), [Psalm 22](#)

There is nothing beautiful about the Cross. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. The Cross is where we hung God. The Cross is where we murdered God. The Cross is where we executed God. Creation despising and rejecting her Creator. Humanity lynching her Savior. Sin having it's way. Satan rejoicing. His victory seemingly complete.

Jesus' suffering was unimaginable. After having been flogged and beaten. His flesh in tatters. His blood loss immense. Jesus is forced to shoulder a 300 lbs. Roman cross. (If He just carried the crossbeam - far more likely - it was still 100 lbs.) He carries it some two thousand feet up Golgotha where nails are driven into his hands and feet. They offer Him wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. He refuses. They strip Him naked so His humiliation and shame will be complete. Crowds gather to make a public spectacle of Him. Even the criminals being executed alongside Him take pleasure in His pain. Finally, He cries out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?" Darkness falls. The ground shakes. The Temple curtain protecting the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Tombs are thrown open. The dead are raised. The natural order of things is thrown into chaos as the Author of Life dies.

Jesus didn't just suffer physically. It was existential. Ontological. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul as well. His cry of God-forsakenness reveals the depths of His pain. His body torn. His mind shattered. His heart utterly broken. His soul rent asunder. There is nothing that can compare to the agony He endured as He bore the sin of the world on His shoulders. He hung there alone. Forsaken by all who knew Him. All who loved Him. Even His Heavenly Father. Jesus hung between heaven and earth, making atonement for humanity in the ugliness of all her sin and satisfying the holy justice of God in all it's beautiful glory. A price had to be paid. God's righteous wrath had to be turned away. And Jesus - fully God and fully Man - was the only one who could do it.

What Jesus suffered on the Cross is a foretaste of hell. For those who wonder what hell is like, they need look no further than Jesus' crucifixion. It is truly terrifying. There is no escape. There is no hope. There is nothing redemptive or beautiful or pleasurable about it. It is awful. It is brutal. It is horrible. And it is just. It is what we deserve. Human beings are born sinners. Born rebellious. Born treasonous and seditious. Our hearts naturally oriented away from God. Our desires naturally opposed to God. Our loves naturally self-centered. There is nothing beautiful about sin. Nothing beautiful about evil. We are foolish to think otherwise.

God forbid we ever get comfortable with the Cross. God forbid we ever take for granted what Jesus had to endure. God forbid we despise His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus suffered and died for my crimes. My wickedness. My sin. What He endured, I rightfully deserve. And it is good for my soul to sit and ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to sit and reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to sit and contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

November 12, 2020
Resurrection

Readings for today: [Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21](#)

Doubt. Fear. Astonishment. Confusion. Disbelief. This is the full range of emotions that swept the followers of Jesus that first Easter morning. No one - absolutely no one - was expecting a resurrection. They all believed it was over. Their hopes and dreams turned to dust. Some were returning home. Some were hiding out in fear. Some went to the tomb to mourn. All of them grieving in their own way.

It has been suggested over centuries that the disciples didn't know a dead body when they saw one. It has been suggested that Joseph and Nicodemus didn't realize Jesus was still alive. It has been suggested that Jesus merely swooned on the cross. Fainted. And in doing so, tricked the Roman soldiers - among the most brutal killers the world has ever known - into believing He was dead. It has been suggested that this same Jesus. Body broken. Incredibly weakened by blood loss. Was somehow able to roll the stone away from within the tomb and escape. That He then appeared to His followers and convinced them He was alive. Still others have repeated the fake news the chief priests tried to spread about Jesus' disciples - fishermen and tax collectors - somehow stealing His body in the dead of night when the Roman guards were asleep. (Something that rarely happened by the way since the punishment for falling asleep on your watch was death.)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the seminal event in human history. It demands attention. It requires reflection. One cannot dismiss it or ignore it or pretend it didn't happen. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have to take Him seriously. We have to consider every word that He said. We have to grapple with the truth He proclaimed about a Kingdom not of this world and a God who loves the world and judges it with righteousness. We have to wrestle with what He has to say about the human condition. The sinful state of our hearts and our desperate need for forgiveness and grace. We have to listen to Him when He tells us how to live and repent of our stubborn, prideful, selfish ways. The resurrection validates everything about Jesus. His life. His teaching. His miracles. His suffering. His death. It is God's stamp of approval on unique identity Jesus claimed for Himself as the Son of God.

This is the truth that confronted the disciples. Jesus, whom they saw die, was now alive. They got to see the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. (Notice in John 20:20 how they all needed this evidence before believing...not just Thomas.) And if Jesus was raised from the dead. If death could not hold Jesus. If the grave could not keep Jesus. Then what did that mean for their lives? How would that change their future? They realized there was now no going back. No returning back to life as they knew it. No more fishing boats and tax booths. God was on the move. This gospel must be proclaimed! They were being given a great commission to carry this news to the ends of the earth!

2000 years later, we are still engaged in this same mission, friends! God is still moving! The news of the resurrection has yet to be proclaimed to every tribe, tongue and nation! Each new generation must come face to face with the Risen Christ! They must deal with the truth of His resurrection! He simply cannot and will not be denied!

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 1-4, Psalms 110

November 13, 2020
TRUE CONVERSION

Readings for today: [Acts 1-4, Psalms 110](#)

There is this great scene in Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C.S. Lewis where Eustace steals a bracelet and turns into a dragon. After initially enjoying the transformation, he soon realizes it is permanent and he is trapped with no hope of escape. He is terrified at the prospect and tries to cut the bracelet off to no avail. Then Aslan appears. The mighty lion who is the Christ-figure in the story. He asks Eustace if he wants to be free. Eustace shakes his head in an emphatic “Yes!” Aslan stretches out his claws and cuts him to the bone. Strips him naked. Lays him bare. The cut is painful. Deep. It goes all the way to the heart. And yet it is necessary for him to be set free.

I’m always reminded of that particular scene when I read the response of the people to Peter’s sermon. Luke, the author of Acts, says they were “cut to the heart.” The full weight of what they had done to Jesus hit them like a ton of bricks. They were heartbroken. They were devastated. And they asked Peter what they should do. “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

Repent. Literally an 180 degree turn in your life. A radical re-orientation of your heart away from the Kingdom of Self towards the Kingdom of God. A radical redirection of your desires. Whereas once you were prideful, arrogant, self-absorbed, greedy, filled with negativity and anger and lusts of all kinds. Those desires are now crucified with Christ and in exchange you receive love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness and mercy. Repentance means a radical re-evaluation of your priorities. Whereas once focused on safety, security, and chasing personal happiness. Now you lay those aside in favor of generosity, service, and sacrifice for the sake of God’s Kingdom. There is no middle ground. No keeping one eye on heaven while fixing the other here on earth. No standing with one foot in the kingdoms of this world and one foot in the Kingdom that is to come. Repentance represents a total commitment. A complete shift in one’s allegiances and loyalties.

Baptism. The primary sign of this shift in allegiance takes place in baptism. Baptism is where we publicly declare our faith in Christ and align ourselves with His Kingdom. We proclaim to the world that we are no longer our own. We no longer serve ourselves. We no longer live according to the corrupt values of our sinful culture. We are in Christ. Our lives have now been taken up into His life. Our future is in His hands. Our resources are His to do with as He chooses. We are simply His servants. Sent out in His name to fulfill His purposes in this world.

Gift of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, God doesn’t send us alone. He doesn’t send us our ill-prepared. He doesn’t send us out helpless or hopeless. He Himself goes with us. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes and takes up residence in our hearts. He imparts all the gifts we need to succeed in Christ’s service. He strengthens us for every battle. He encourages us in the face of every challenge. He gives us joy in every trial. He grants all the wisdom and understanding we need to make sense of His calling on our lives. The Holy Spirit is quite literally the greatest gift we could ever receive.

Repent. Be baptized. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to respond in faith to the work Christ has done on our behalf. Do you believe?

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 5-8

November 16, 2020
GOD HATES RACISM

Readings for today: [Acts 9-11](#)

I remember the first truly multicultural worship service I attended. It was in Chicago. In a Latino community called La Villita that is located within the larger African-American community of Lawndale. It was a violent place. Rival gangs running the streets. When kids came to youth group, they had to be picked up in vans with blacked out windows because they crossed gang lines. I was in college at the time and we sent a team to serve a local church in the community over Spring Break. We arrived on Saturday and attended worship on Sunday. That particular Sunday, they had done a pulpit swap with a local African-American church. So the preacher and choir were black. The congregation was mainly poor, immigrant Latinos who only spoke Spanish. And our group was made up of privileged, white college students from Boulder, CO. We got to witness a miracle that day. As the preacher got rolling - as only African-American preachers can!!! - the translator tried his best to keep up. But as the sermon began to crescendo, this incredible thing happened. The translator sat down. The Spirit descended. I watched as everyone heard this man preach in their own language. It was clear that even the Spanish-speakers in our midst were tracking. It was like Pentecost. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

God's plan was always to move beyond the confines of the Promised Land and the Jewish ethnic group to reach the Gentile nations. In fact, this was part of the initial promise God gave to Abraham! In him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed! And it is precisely this promise that is being re-affirmed in the vision Peter receives from the Lord. What was once unclean is now clean. What was once unholy is now holy. What was once excluded is now included. The Gentiles who had been separated from God were now going to be grafted in. Those who were not God's people were now going to be part of God's people. Centuries of racial prejudice were erased in a moment as God sends Peter to Cornelius to lead him to saving faith. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Now the gospel will go forth to the entire world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation will have the opportunity to receive Christ. This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, the underlying theme of the entire Book of Acts, and the main issue Paul will address in every single one of his letters. Jews and Gentiles living together as one family under God.

Friends, God hates racism. Hates racial segregation. Hates how His family has divided along racial lines. His desire is that all should be saved and not only come to a knowledge of His truth but then join together in authentic community as one family. This is not easy. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in our country. We have a very difficult time building friendships across ethnic lines. We much prefer to gather with people who look like us, live like us, and think like us. Sitting down with someone who comes from a radically different life experience is very challenging. We struggle to listen. We struggle to honor them. We struggle to communicate value and friendship because so often their perspective feels threatening to us. All this was true for the early Christians as well. The Jews who first came to faith could not imagine believing in Jesus without circumcision. Could not fathom following Christ without also following the Law. They had been taught for generations that Gentiles were unclean and unholy and to avoid contact with them at all costs. Now God was doing a new thing. Now Jews were being called to embrace Gentiles as their brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in undeniable ways. How would they respond?

How do we respond? Over the years, I have been blessed with spiritual mentors and friends from a variety of ethnicities and social/economic backgrounds. I have spent time with the urban poor. Been in

their homes. Listened to their stories. Heard their struggles. I have spent time in prisons and with ex-convicts who tell me how hard it is to reintegrate back into life after serving their time. The lack of jobs. The probation process. How easy it is to recidivate because at least the prison system is familiar. I have spent time with African-American friends who have helped me understand what it's like to have to grow up guarded and suspicious because you cannot trust the justice system. I have spent time with Latino friends who've shared with me stories of racial animus that breaks my heart. I have spent time with Asian-American friends who tell me of the challenges they've faced as their families transitioned from their home country to the USA. More recently, I've listened to Ethiopian refugees share their stories of what it's like to seek asylum in our country. It's overwhelming.

The gospel is designed by God to bring us together. It has divine power to tear down every stronghold, every wall, every division that keeps us apart. The gospel gives us the courage to honor one another in our differences. God delights in the diversity of His family. God's goal is not to make us all color-blind or erase our ethnic distinctions. The gospel does not turn us all into one homogeneous lump of clay. Rather it grounds our fundamental identity in Christ which in turn allows to celebrate the beauty and genius of the palate God used to create human beings in the first place! The fruit of the gospel is not a post-racial community but one that is inclusive of all races, each with their own unique perspective and experience.

How do we get started? By simply reaching out. Being intentional. Engaging someone who is not like us in conversation. Listening more than speaking. Withholding the tendency we all have to judge someone else's experience or perceive it as a threat. Cultivating the humility to learn. Willingly relinquishing power and privilege in order to create a safe space for people to share. It's not easy but the gospel makes it possible. In fact, the gospel mandates it. Just ask Peter. ;-)

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 12-14

November 17, 2020
FIRST MISSIONARIES

Readings for today: [Acts 12-14](#)

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabas and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabas and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. Paul shows no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He calls down God's judgment on the man and strikes him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabas went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed.

Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the “the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!” (Acts 12:24)

God is not done! Despite what you may or may not hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: James 1-5

November 18, 2020
REAL LIFE IN THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for today: [James 1-5](#)

Real life in the real church is messy. The church of Jesus Christ - this side of heaven - is filled with sinful people who bring all kinds of baggage with them. In my experience as a pastor, hurting people tend to hurt people. Those who are in pain want everyone else to feel their pain. Broken people often try to break others without even realizing it. Life in this world is full of suffering. Trauma. Abuse. Heartbreak. We face trials of various kinds. Temptations around every corner. And we bring all that with us when we join a church.

It wasn't much different two thousand years ago. James, the brother of Jesus, was one of the key leaders in the church in Jerusalem as it was just getting started. He lived in a violent, turbulent time. The Jewish people were beginning to rise up against their Roman oppressors. Each rebellious movement was put down with greater force and greater violence. National unrest would finally break out in open war, resulting in the utter destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Throughout this time period, James pastored the church. He pastored a group of Jewish Christians who were trying to figure out how to live the Jesus Life in the midst of all this uncertainty and conflict. They faced trials and tribulations. They suffered tremendously under the Romans as well as the Jewish religious authorities. They were persecuted on every side. One would think such hardship would bring them together. Cause them to link arms against their common adversaries. Unfortunately, this was not the case. They gossiped about each other. Showed partiality. Divided themselves along economic lines. Like all of us, they struggled with doubts and fears. They struggled with anger and frustration. Too many of them resisted putting their faith into action. They fought over position and influence and power. They aligned themselves too closely with the world and its corrupt values. Sound familiar at all?

Too often our response as Christians is to leave the church. We get our feelings hurt. We experience deep wounds. We are disappointed. Let down. Expectations go unmet. Rather than humble ourselves before the Lord and engage in the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we simply walk out the door. We think this solves our problem. We think this resolves our pain. But it only compounds our situation. We stall out spiritually. It's like we get stuck in an endless time loop. Never moving on until we actually do what Christ commands which is to leave our gift at the altar and first reconcile with our brothers and sisters. I've seen it so many times and it is heartbreakingly familiar.

What's the answer? Follow the biblical guidance from James. Consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds. Trust God for wisdom to know how to handle each and every situation. Remain steadfast under trial. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be doers of the Word not just hearers. Show no partiality. Let Christ tame our tongues. Set our minds on heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason and full of mercy. Humble ourselves before the Lord and each other so we will not quarrel or be driven by sinful desire. Live vulnerably before our brothers and sisters so we can receive prayer for healing and strength and be restored gently when we fall into sin. Do these things over the long haul and you will find yourself reflecting more and more the image of Christ. This is what the church ultimately is all about! It is the crucible of our sanctification. The very place where iron sharpens iron and one person sharpens another.

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 1-3

November 19, 2020
JUSTIFICATION

Readings for today: [Galatians 1-3](#)

I have often wondered about the Pharisees. Cast as Jesus' enemies throughout the four Gospels, they have been caricatured throughout Christian history in a variety of ways. Theologians tending to flatten them out. Make them two-dimensional. Convenient straw men to argue the superiority of the gospel. Thankfully, more recent scholarship is treating them with more respect. We are seeking to understand them on their own terms. See the world through their eyes. Let them speak for themselves. This, in turn, is yielding deeper insights into our understanding of the four Gospels and especially the Pauline Epistles.

Many centuries ago, Martin Luther - an anti-Semite - projected his own insecurities back onto the Pharisees. Because he was consumed with how to get right before God, he assumed the Jews were as well. He perceived their faithfulness to the Law to be a form of legalism. A way of self-justification. He thought wrongly that the Jews kept the Law in order to earn God's love and favor. And this misconception persists to this day in Christian circles.

The Pharisees did not believe keeping the Law would earn them salvation. That's not what "justification" meant within their worldview. For them, justification was "about the whole business of being human; of being Jewish human; of living in a Jewish community; of living in a threatened Jewish community; of living with wisdom, integrity and hope in a threatened Jewish community; of living with zeal for Torah, the covenant and above all Israel's faithful God within a threatened Jewish community." (NT Wright) Justification, for the Pharisees, was about identity. It was not about going to heaven after one died. It was not about eternal life per se. It was wrapped up and intertwined with what it meant to be God's chosen people in a world full of pagan idolatry. Pharisees believed with all their heart that if one was faithful to Torah, God would resurrect them on the final day, thus "justifying" the way they had lived their lives.

So now imagine you are Saul the Pharisee. Advanced even among his Pharisical peers. Saul encounters the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus. Immediately he is confronted with the reality that if Yahweh has raised Jesus from the dead - the eschatological hope of every Pharisee - then Jesus must be the Justified One. And if Jesus is justified, then Saul is in real trouble. All his zeal is misdirected! All his ferocious loyalty to Torah is misplaced! Everything he has been taught. Everything he believes. Everything he has given his life to is upside down, turned around, and backwards! Jesus rising from the dead changes everything for Saul/Paul.

"We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16) Saul, now the Apostle Paul, has undergone a radical transformation. All his hopes which once rested on faithfulness to Torah are transferred to Jesus Christ. To crib the NT Wright quote above...Jesus now shows us what it means to be human. Jesus shows us what it means to be Jewish (expanded now beyond the boundaries of race to include those who are "Jewish" by faith) human. What it means to live in community as God's chosen people. What it means to live with wisdom, integrity and hope when the community is threatened as it always is by the pagan forces of this world. Jesus shows us true faithfulness to Torah, to the covenant, and above all, to Yahweh.

Justification comes - not through faithfulness to Torah - but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As we place our faith in Him, we are justified by His work on our behalf. His faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. His sinlessness covering our sin. His righteousness exchanged for our unrighteousness. This is why Paul exclaims in one of the most beautiful passages in all the New Testament, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 4-6

November 20, 2020
TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: [Galatians 4-6](#)

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this himself. He had experienced this himself. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drove them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification.

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the sting of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom that is centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit - through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people - we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of God's presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 15-16

November 21, 2020
CHURCH CONFLICT

Readings for today: [Acts 15-16](#)

I frequently come across people who are surprised when conflict takes place in a church. They have this impression that because we all love Jesus we would never have a difference of opinion. Never have an argument or disagreement. They seem to think “unity” is the same as “unanimity” which simply is not true. From the very beginning, the church has struggled over significant issues. Struggled to come to one mind and one accord on various things. Because we are all sinners, it is not easy to discern the will of God.

Today’s passage highlights a number of different conflicts. Conflict over circumcision and the role of the Jewish law in a Christian’s life. Conflict over restoring an individual who has proved untrustworthy in the past. Conflict over where the Spirit was leading different evangelism teams to go. Conflict in Philippi over the deliverance of a slave girl. Conflict in prison which results in the conversion of the jailer. It is messy. There is division. The process of discernment often involves trial and error. Mistakes are made. I imagine feelings get hurt. Frustrations mount. But through it all, the Spirit is faithful to make His will known. And the result is the churches are strengthened in their faith and increase in numbers daily as God adds to them those who are being saved.

Is it possible that Acts 15 and 16 are paradigmatic for today? Do they reflect real life in the real church? Should we expect conflict? Expect disagreement? Expect arguments over where to go and what to do and who to involve? And if so, how can we resolve conflict peacefully? In a way that glorifies God and brings honor to His name?

One of the keys to navigating conflict in a godly manner is mutual submission. In Acts 15:1, a question is raised. Is circumcision required for salvation? This was no small matter. It was a question of identity. For centuries, the rite of circumcision had set the Jewish people apart. Marked them as God’s chosen people. They had suffered for this belief. Been persecuted for this belief. No matter where they found themselves, they were easily identified by the fact they had been circumcised so there was never any place to run or hide. Since Abraham, circumcision had formed the core part of their shared identity and linked them intimately with the covenant promises of God. Now it was being threatened...what should they do? Paul and Barnabus had strong opinions. Based on what they had seen and experienced, it appears the Holy Spirit was moving among the Gentiles. Non-Jews. People who were not circumcised. Why add to what the Spirit was doing? This stirred up quite a bit of dissension and debate. So they decided to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles to make their case. Again, there was much debate. Strong opinions offered on all sides. Finally Peter stood up. Shared his heart. Shared his experience. Sought to apply the Scriptures. Once again, Paul and Barnabus shared about the signs and wonders they had seen in their travels. James called for a decision and the council decided to let circumcision be a secondary matter. Non-essential when it comes to salvation.

This has huge implications and it is notable that their conclusion “seemed good to the apostles, elders, and the whole church.” Though the issue will continue to come up throughout the rest of the book of Acts, this moment represents a turning point. A general willingness of all parties to mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Another aspect that’s highlighted is their ability to differentiate between essentials and non-essentials when it comes to the gospel. Again, just because a compromise was reached doesn’t mean everyone agreed. Unity is not the same as unanimity. I imagine quite a few of the Pharisees who had come to faith walked away with serious reservations. But they set those

reservations aside for the sake of the unity of the church. They recognized the danger of division and how much harm would come should the church fracture over this issue. They made sure to focus on the essentials - not getting mixed up in idolatry, sexual immorality, and maintaining purity which are all matters of the heart - rather than force Gentiles to become Jews before becoming Christian.

Would that modern-day Christians were able to do the same! Instead of fighting over secondary matters like baptismal practices, worship styles, spiritual gifts, etc., can we not exercise mutual forbearance and submission and keep the main thing the main thing? Rather than pull up stakes the moment we disagree with the preacher or the elder board, can we not put aside our differences for the sake of the unity of the church? Rather than bounce the moment we are disappointed or let down, can we not obey the gospel's call to forgive and reconcile? Unity does not mean unanimity so we should never expect we will always agree. The key to doing life together is navigating conflict with a humility that honors God and keeps

November 23, 2020
FAITH ON TRIAL

Readings for today: [Acts 17, 18-1-18](#)

One of the more common misunderstandings in Acts is Paul's appearance before the Areopagus in Athens. Because of Luke's editorial comment, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21); there is this assumption that Paul was appearing before a kind of debate society. Nothing could be farther from the truth. New Testament scholar, NT Wright, points out in his most recent biography of the Apostle Paul that the "Areopagus" was actually the Athenian Supreme Court. Paul was being charged as a "preacher of foreign divinities" which is actually the same charge that condemned Socrates. As such, Paul had a lot more at stake than winning an argument. His life was on the line. In a very real sense, the validity of the Christian faith was on the line as well.

Paul's defense of his faith is brilliant. Marks him as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the ancient world. He truly belongs in the same pantheon as Plato and Aristotle and Cicero. "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:22-23) Paul understands that God has revealed Himself in all kinds of ways. As pagan as the Athenians were, one thing that could be affirmed was their desire for God. They built all kinds of shrines to all kinds of false gods and while this practice was idolatrous, Paul was able to see past the surface to the deeper reality of their spiritual hunger. He plays on this spiritual hunger by affirming their search and uses it as a springboard to present the gospel. He even goes on to quote their own poets back to them, demonstrating how widely read and engaged he was with Hellenistic culture. This is remarkable for a former Pharisee and deeply instructive for us.

It is so easy in our world to fall into the trap of fundamentalism. Believing our way is the only way and any deviation represents a departure from truth. Fundamentalism infects both progressives and conservatives. It seems to touch every debate these days whether the issue is race, sexuality, gender, abortion, etc. We cast these conversations in sharp binaries. We demand grace and nuance for our position but refuse to extend that same courtesy to others. We spend so much of our time and energy dissecting every single tweet, FB post, or IG story in an effort to uncover deception. We assume the worst about the motivations of our opponents. We seem to feed off the negative energy.

You might have heard the saying - oft attributed to Benjamin Franklin - that a "half-truth is a great lie." You might even agree with such a statement. However, there is a flip side. A half-truth does contain half a truth. And in our rush to point out the "lie" we often miss the opportunity to affirm what may be true and noble and right. This is especially important when engaging seekers. Those engaged in an authentic search for God. They have legitimate questions. Important concerns that need to be heard. Doubts and fears that need to be expressed and taken seriously. Not dismissed. Not diminished. Paul affirms what he can about the Athenians. He affirms their religious hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Paul sees the half-truth reflected in their shrine to the "unknown god" and he makes Him known to them. Even though he is on trial for his life, Paul is so confident in Christ that he finds a way past self-defense and instead uses his time on the witness stand to share Jesus.

Every day our faith is put on trial. By the people we meet, work, and interact with on a regular basis. They ask all kinds of questions. Make all kinds of assumptions. Issue all kinds of statements. As

Christians, we can spend our time and energy deconstructing everything they have to say. Pointing out the intellectual and spiritual inconsistencies. We can focus on winning the argument or we can focus on winning the person's heart. Asking good clarifying questions. Honoring what we can about their beliefs. Pointing out where their truth may unwittingly intersect with the Truth of the gospel. Because our confidence flows from Christ, we don't have to take things personal. Don't have to be defensive. Don't have to feel threatened. We are at peace because we know Jesus has overcome the world and is making Himself known.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

November 24, 2020
TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Readings for today: [1 Thessalonians 1-5](#)

“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.” (1 Thessalonians 1:4-8)

I cannot imagine a greater compliment than to be told that my witness had “sounded forth” throughout the region I live and my faith in God had “gone forth everywhere” so that the need for evangelism ceased. And yet this is exactly what happened through the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas (Silvanus) traveled through their city on their way to Athens. They stopped and preached for three consecutive Saturdays on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many Jews and Greeks and several leading women came to faith as the Word came in power and authority and conviction. However, some disbelieved and they stirred up a mob to attack Paul and Silas. When they could not find them, they attacked Jason and a few others. Dragging them out of their homes into the streets. They brought them before the city authorities with the hope they would be charged with treason for proclaiming a king other than Caesar but Jason paid off the officials and they were released. They then helped Paul and Silas escape during the night. This is the affliction Paul is referencing in his letter to them. But despite the persecution, they held onto to their joy in the Holy Spirit and clearly remained steadfast in their faith to the point that their reputation had spread thus making a return trip from Paul unnecessary.

I love how the crowd puts it in Acts 17:6, “These men have turned the world upside down...” Would that we would live such gospel-centered lives that we too might be accused of such a thing! Turning the world upside down is exactly what the gospel does. It completely reorders all we love. It redirects all our thoughts and desires. It reorients all our priorities. The things we used to hold dear no longer have much of a hold on us. The idols we cling to so tightly become empty and worthless. All our pride and achievement and cast down before the throne of Jesus. All our wealth and privilege and influence and power pales in comparison to the riches and authority Christ offers us in Himself. Our concern for our reputation and the esteem of others diminishes as our fear of God increases. This is what happens when we come to Christ. He fills us with His love. His affections. His joy. His peace. His righteousness. As these things begin to flow in and through our lives, we are transformed. We are renewed. We are set free. And because we have been set free, this world no longer has anything for us. No longer has any leverage over us. No longer can threaten to undo us. For we live for Christ and if we die, we gain!

So what does this all mean for you today? How are you turning the world upside down at your work or school? In your home or neighborhood? As you gather around your table with friends and family for Thanksgiving, what will the conversation sound like? Will the people you spend time feel blessed for having been with you? Will they hear and experience the love of Jesus through you? Will you set the example for those who do not yet believe through your sacrifice and willingness to serve?

Readings for tomorrow: [2 Thessalonians 1-3](#)

November 25, 2020
GOD IS MY HELPER

Readings for today: [2 Thessalonians 1-3](#)

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power...” (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own willpower. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as secular motivational talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve fallen into this trap as a preacher myself!

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It’s not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

In the verse above, Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God’s Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them.

This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our willpower alone. The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God’s help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. And once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength

to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

Years ago, a professor challenged me with a quote from Evagrius Ponticus, one of the most influential theologians of the 4th century. Ponticus defined the sin of pride as living as if God were not our helper. So here's the fundamental question...is God your helper? Do you see the hand of God at work in every part of your life? Do you thank God for all His benefits? Do you praise God for the mercies He has shown you? Do you lean on God for all you need for this life and the next?

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 18:19-19:41

November 26, 2020
GIVING THANKS

Readings for today: [Acts 18:19-19:41](#)

“We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

“We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.” (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

“For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...” (Ephesians 1:15-18)

The Apostle Paul was a thankful man. We see it over and over again in his letters. He thanks God for just about every single church. He thanks God for just about every single brother and sister in Christ. He is thankful for the ways he sees God at work in their midst. Amidst hardship. Persecution. Division. He thanks God for His miracles. He thanks God for His blessings. He thanks God for the grace He has lavished on us in Jesus Christ. And when one reads Paul’s letters, we might be tempted to think life was pretty good for Paul. He must have had it okay. He must have never faced struggles or temptations or wrestled with anxieties and fears. Friends, nothing could farther from the truth.

Paul suffered throughout the course of his life. Especially after becoming a Christian. He worked long hours. He was beaten. He was imprisoned. Subject to death threats. Five times he received 40 lashes. Three times beaten with rods. Once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times shipwrecked and at least one of those times he spent a day and night adrift at sea. He lived in constant danger on his travels. Not just from the elements or from the roving bands of highwaymen who often waylaid people on the road but from his own people. He often went sleepless. Often went hungry. Often suffered from exposure. He struggled with anxiety over his churches. Fears of their future. His was no easy life. And yet he was thankful.

How is such a thing possible? In the face of COVID. Economic hardships. Stay at home lockdowns. Fears over physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual safety. How is it possible in a world where death seems to lie around every corner. Cancer. Heart attacks. Strokes. My wife and recently had two college friends suffer brain bleeds. One survived. The other did not. And we grieve with both families. I think about the earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, drought, wildfires, or famine over which we have so little control. The suffering these natural disasters create is enormous. I think about life-threatening poverty around the world. Men and women and children suffering from addiction. I think about the burdens I carry. Anxieties over the churches I serve. Fears for my own family. Uncertainty over the future. It’s enough to drive me mad.

God calls us to a different way. The way of thanksgiving. “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18) He calls us to focus our minds on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is

commendable, if there is anything of excellence or anything worthy of praise.” (Phil. 4:8) He calls us to consider the blessings and the riches of grace which He has lavished on us. (Eph. 1) Finally and most importantly, He calls us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2) This is why we give thanks, friends! God Himself has come into this violent, dark, capricious, unfriendly, unsafe world not to condemn us but to save us! To lift us up out of the pit. Out of the miry clay. Out of the depths of our depression and despair. Happy Thanksgiving!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 1-4

November 27, 2020
THE MIND OF CHRIST

Readings for today: [1 Corinthians 1-4](#)

Seeking the mind of Christ. It's the primary responsibility for the Christian as we seek to navigate the challenges of this world. It is a higher priority than our own happiness. A higher priority than our own comfort. A higher priority than our own success. It is more important than our pride. More important than our public reputation. More important than our political allegiances. We know we have discerned the mind of Christ when there is spiritual unity and godly humility and mutual submission. We see the mind of Christ in action when there is forgiveness and grace and reconciliation. We recognize it in those who are willing to be last so that others might be first. Those who are willing to decrease so that others may increase. Those who are self-effacing and who practice the art of self-forgetfulness.

Seeking the mind of Christ has never been easy. The early Christians in Corinth struggled mightily with the concept and to embrace the practice. They were divided. They followed charismatic human leaders rather than Christ Jesus Himself. They sought the wisdom of this world. They wanted to be esteemed by the top philosophical thinkers of their day. They boasted in their own ability. The depth of their spiritual maturity. They stood in judgment over those who seemed "less spiritual." They wanted all the credit for the ministry they were building. They refused to share the glory with another. They wanted to be known. They wanted to be influencers. They wanted to be taken seriously and treated with respect by the culturally elite of their day. But the gospel calls us to a different way.

How do we seek and find the mind of Christ? There is only one way path. The path of humility. Relinquishment. Surrender. Listen to how Paul describes it for his Corinthians friends...

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Corinthians 1:21-23, 25)

"But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

These are some of the most powerful passages in the New Testament. They resonate deep within us for we recognize the Spirit who inspired them. God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. God is not bound by human wisdom. God cannot be reduced to human categories. He is completely and utterly free from any constraints in this world. He makes foolish the wise. He makes

weak the strong. So if we are to seek the mind of Christ, we must lay aside our natural inclinations. We must lay aside our pride and ego and desire to be in control. We must lay aside our anxieties and fears. Instead, we must trust Him to reveal Himself in His time and in His way. We must seek to know nothing except Christ. We must seek to follow Christ in His footsteps. We must align our hearts with Christ. As we do, we will find ourselves being built up together as God's Temple. He will come to dwell in our midst. He will come to fill us and sanctify us.

Friends, resist the temptation to believe your own hype. Resist the temptation to believe you are "something" in this world. Resist any notions of power and privilege. Let go and let God have all the glory! The reality is we are simply servants of Christ. We are simply stewards of the mysteries of the gospel. We do not own the gospel. It is not ours to command or control. We do not own Christ. He is not ours to direct nor is He under our authority. God is God and we are not. Christ is Christ and we are not. We serve at His pleasure. We bow before His throne. We live and move and have our being under His sovereign authority. And this sets us free from all the strivings and struggles of this world. Seek the mind of Christ! Let your heart be filled with the love of Christ! Let all you do be motivated by a desire to honor Christ! This is His will for our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 5-8

November 30, 2020
WAIVING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: [1 Corinthians 9-11](#)

As Americans, we believe every human being is endowed with inalienable rights. Among these are a right to life. A right to liberty. A right to pursue happiness. These rights are embodied in our Constitution. They are explored in further detail in our Bill of Rights. Indeed, once could say our entire legal code is an attempt to flesh out how we define our “rights.” We have a “bill of rights” for taxpayers, patients, students, etc. When we arrest people for crimes, the first thing we do is inform them of their rights. We advocate in the global community for the enforcement of human rights and we often take action if we feel such rights are violated. Most of our hottest political debates center around what we perceive to be our “rights.” The right to life vs. the right to choose. The right to bear arms vs. the right to keep our children safe. The right to defend our borders vs. the human rights of immigrants/refugees seeking asylum from extreme poverty and violence in their home countries. Even on an individual level, we cling to our “rights” and react strongly if we feel they are being infringed upon or violated.

The Apostle Paul could not be more different. Because he believes with all his heart in the saving grace of Christ, he willingly surrenders his rights for the greater glory of the gospel. Paul has every “right” to assert his authority as an apostle. Every “right” to get married. Every “right” to work for a living. Indeed, he has every “right” to make his living off the gospel just like the Levitical priests. Paul has every “right” to eat or drink whatever he wants since God has set aside the kosher food laws of the Old Testament. He has every “right” to circumcise or not circumcise, depending on the situation. If Paul were to really assert his “rights”, he could claim privilege as a Jew among Jews, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil. 3:4-6) But Paul is more than willing to relinquish any and all of his rights...why? Because “he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.” (Philippians 3:8)

Part and parcel of becoming a Christian means waiving whatever rights we believe we are entitled to as human beings, American citizens, you name it. We have to be willing to lay these things down for the greater privilege of serving Christ. Christ demands total and complete allegiance. He will not allow our “rights” to get in the way of His glory and the advancement of His Kingdom. Not even those most fundamental rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does this mean Christians can never be happy? Never be safe? Never be free? Of course not. What it means is that even these rights we hold so dear cannot get in the way of the gospel. As Paul writes, “we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 9:12)

Ultimately, “rights” have to do with identity. Wherever we ground our identity, we will guard and protect those rights fiercely. Think about the culture wars that are currently raging and what that reveals about where so many find their identity and thus their “rights” as individuals. Gender. Sexuality. Race. Political affiliation. National citizenship. Economic status. Educational level. All of these things become part of our identity. Some we are born with. Some we achieve over the course of our lives. Christ calls us to lay all of them down. To willingly and joyfully surrender them for the even greater privilege of becoming His disciple! Once our identity is grounded in Him, we realize all the “rights” we’ve been clinging to are rubbish compared to the magnificence of His amazing grace. This, in turn, gives us unbelievable freedom. I love how Paul puts it, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win

Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Friends, what “rights” have you been holding onto? What privileges have you been clinging to? What parts of your identity still need to be surrendered to Jesus? Let go. Open your hands. Open your heart and experience anew the freedom that comes only from the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 12-14